

Cross the river by feeling the stones: How did nonlocal grassroots nonprofits overcome administrative barriers to provide quick responses to COVID-19?

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Abstract

This field report explores how nonlocal grassroots organizations provided effective and quick responses during the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and surrounding regions. Despite the lack of resources and local connections, they were able to overcome administrative failures and provide quick responses to the crisis. Built on a researcher-practitioner collaborative action research project, three strategies facilitating grassroots organizations' quick and effective responses are analyzed and discussed: putting pandemic relief as the strategic priority of their organizations, leveraging social media platforms to scale up existing organizational networks and foster cross-sector collaboration, and effective online trust-building. As COVID-19 unprecedentedly pushes nonprofits to transform how they deliver services and engage stakeholders, these findings have important policy and theoretical implications for an expanded view of how nonprofits may engage in disaster responses and how public and private funders may shift their funding strategies to cultivate such capacities of grassroots nonprofits.

KEYWORDS

administrative failure, COVID-19, China, disaster responses, grassroots nonprofit organization

1 | INTRODUCTION

The role of nonprofit and community-based organizations in disaster relief has been celebrated by public administration and nonprofit scholars for decades (Cheng et al., 2020; Nolte & Boenigk, 2013; Rotolo & Berg, 2011). However, relatively little attention has been paid to how nonprofits can participate in disaster relief and community building while they cannot provide services and relief on site. Moreover, the existing literature often assumes that these efforts are often driven by resourceful, well-connected, and professional organizations (Eikenberry et al., 2007; Simo & Bies, 2007). Based on a unique action research program jointly initiated and implemented by scholars and practitioners, we challenge these assumptions and provide a synthesis of the conditions that facilitated these grassroots organizations' quick and effective responses during the initial stage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and surrounding regions. We

also reflect on how these emergent patterns of nonprofit responses to the pandemic may shed light on the changing (or not) relationship between the government and nonprofits in China and beyond (Jing & Hu, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of Wuhan on January 23, 2020 were an unprecedented crisis that neither the government nor the society had ever encountered before. COVID-19 patients flocked to hospitals and soon realized that there were no more available beds. Essential community services were cut off, leaving vulnerable populations—elderly, pregnant women, people with chronic diseases—desperately seeking social support. The shortage of medical supplies was so serious that medical workers had to bypass the government and sent out individual pleas for donations. The government's responses to COVID-19 in the first few weeks were inadequate. The emergency plan developed by the government to deal with normal disasters was insufficient for this sweeping crisis.

The administrative failure in responding to the pandemic intensified panic and precipitated the dysfunction of the social system. Instead of offsetting government failure as suggested by the classic three failure theory (Steinberg, 2006), nonprofits encountered more malfunctions and barriers due to the administrative breakdown. On January 26, the Bureau of Civil Affairs made a policy that only five designated government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) were allowed to accept donations and volunteers to Wuhan.¹ Yet these GONGOs were completely under administrative control and did not take action proactively. Despite occupying enormous resources, dependence on government and red tape deterred GONGOs' responses to the crisis as governments themselves were not clear about the proper solution.² Meanwhile, numerous donors and nonprofits were eager to support the frontline workers yet had no channel to contribute except through the five designated GONGOs. Zhu (2020) described the simultaneous failure of multiple sectors as the "complete societal failure."

In this context of complete societal failure during the initial stage of pandemic relief in Wuhan, a group of nonlocal grassroots organizations, which did not have any professional experiences in disaster relief nor sufficient resources and local networks when joining the relief, surprisingly emerged and achieved major success in building effective collaborative networks and delivering aids to Wuhan and surrounding regions. Why can these organizations effectively deliver aids while some professional and resourceful nonprofit organizations struggled to provide quick responses? To answer this question, we present a brief report from the field based on in-depth reflections by grassroots nonprofit leaders who were involved at the early stage of COVID-19 responses in Wuhan.

2 | DATA AND METHODS

To understand how these nonlocal grassroots organizations quickly responded to COVID-19, we collaborated with the Ginkgo Foundation in China to carry out a practitioner-researcher collaborative action research project. The Ginkgo Foundation was among the first foundations in China to offer flexible funding support to the leaders of grassroots organizations³ (known as the Ginkgo fellows, the

Chinese version of Ashoka fellows) to engage in the initial responses to COVID-19 in Wuhan and nearby regions. This action research project is driven by practitioners and aims at helping Ginkgo fellows reflect and document their own experiences in responding to this crisis.

For this field report, we apply a no-variance design combined with within case analysis, which is suitable for exploring common themes across cases and identifying mechanisms leading to a certain outcome (Collier et al., 2004; Ragin, 2004). This methodology is particularly useful for phenomena that are unique and recent (e.g., the COVID-19 crisis). It involves detailed write-up of each case and the intentional search and conceptualization of cross-case patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989). Following this case study methodology, we selected nonlocal grassroots nonprofits organizations that successfully provided key supplies or services during the initial stage of pandemic relief to Wuhan and surrounding regions on time (Table 1 shows the details of their achievements). Since our research focuses on the responses of nonlocal grassroots organizations, the organizations selected were relatively small (with less than 30 staff members), established by ordinary people and not predominantly reliant on government funding or donations from wealthy individuals. They were not disaster relief organizations but were professional nonprofit organizations in areas such as education, youth development, and so on.

Seven hundred and twenty-two pages of interviews, practitioners' self-reflections, and media coverages were used for this research, totaling 587,307 words. The first and second authors independently coded the documents and cross-referenced the main themes about the conditions enabling quick responses to COVID-19. To better triangulate our findings, we sent the Chinese version of this report to the leaders of the eight grassroots organizations, funders for the grassroots relief action, a professional disaster relief expert, and two researchers involved in the action research project for informant feedback (Schwartz-Shea, 2006). After receiving their feedbacks, we had five interviews with them to ensure the accuracy of the facts and seek additional inputs to the interpretation of the findings. The interviews are numbered.

3 | STRATEGIES FACILITATING QUICK RESPONSES TO COVID-19

We identified three strategies facilitating the success of developing quick responses to the crisis: putting pandemic relief as the strategic priority of their organizations, leveraging social media platforms to scale up existing organizational networks and foster cross-sector collaboration, and effective online trust-building. Their success was not planned but came from continuous adaptation to changing environment and problem-solving, as a Chinese proverb rightly put, "cross the river by feeling the stones." The following sections discuss each condition in detail.

¹Bureau of Civil Affairs, Announcement No.476.

²First author's personal communication with a fund manager at a local Charity Federation on February 7, 2020. The interviewee reported that the government asked charities "not to compete with the government and stop bidding for medical supplies." The fund manager then turned to the international market to buy masks and protective suits, yet GONGOs' strict financial rules made purchasing and delivering products international extremely difficult, and the complicated administrative procedure delayed the action of the relief, "the medical workers desperately needed masks and protective suits, but the people in charge had to consider compliance because they could not bear the risk. I think it is problematic to treat charities as government agencies." A news report about the Red Cross (retrieved from <https://opinion.caixin.com/2020-02-02/101510708.html>), which is affiliated with the government, echoes the viewpoint and observation of the interviewee. The distribution of donations to the Red Cross was not determined by the Red Cross but the government.

³Grassroots organizations refer to independent nonprofits that were founded by ordinary people who are not political or business elites and with relatively small scale (less than 30 full-time staff).

TABLE 1 Case description

Case	Mission	Roles in the pandemic relief	Key collaborators	Number of participants in action research	Achievements
1	Health care	Deliver drugs and provide aids to patients with rare diseases	The Federation for Rare Disease (GONGO), patient associations, pharmaceutical companies, drug stores, and other medical associations	8	Till February 21, the relief program provided assistance to 197 patients with 23 types of rare diseases
2	Education	Deliver medical supplies	Grassroots nonprofit organizations	3	The grassroots initiative jointly provided 2321 oxygen concentrator and 3731 blood oxygen saturation monitors to hospitals, quarantine stations, and 94 severely ill patients
3	Education	Provide psychological and medical care to pregnant women	Doctors, volunteers, social workers, and street-level bureaucrats	1	The program served over 1,400 pregnant women, and 863 newborns
4	Youth	Deliver medical supplies	Street-level bureaucrats, businessmen, young volunteers, and doctors	2	Till February 20, the program supported plateau and urban communities and delivered 19,850 medical masks, 150 protective gears, 100 heaters, 10 tons of sterilizing fluid, and other medical supplies
5	Health care	Fundraising, and deliver medical supplies	Grassroots nonprofit organizations, alumni associations, and businessmen	13	The foundation helped raise over \$12 million funds for grassroots initiatives and supported over 14 relief programs
6	Education	Deliver medical supplies	Businessmen, an alumni association, and GONGOs	15	Delivered medical supplies worth over a million dollars, including oxygen concentrators, blood oxygen saturation monitors, protective gears, and disinfection equipment
7	Health care	Deliver medical supplies	Hospitals and voluntary groups	1	Till June 3, 2020, the program received over \$1.3 million donations and delivered medical supplies and living supplies to 128 hospitals, 15 communities, and 18 nonprofits in Hubei and other provinces and abroad.
8	Education	Deliver medical supplies	Hospitals and voluntary groups	1	The organization received over \$200,000 cash donations. It received and delivered medical supplies worth over a million dollars, including medical gloves, masks, protective suits, sanitizers, medical devices

Note: This action research is still on-going as this field report is being written. This table is created based on the available data.

3.1 | Putting pandemic relief as the strategic priority of their organizations

When the government announced Wuhan outbreak, most nonprofit leaders and staff stayed at home with their families to celebrate the biggest festival of the year—the Spring Festival. For most nonprofit leaders, it was not an easy decision to call their staff and devote all the efforts to pandemic relief, which does not fit their mission and expertise.

Nevertheless, with the increased severity of the pandemic, they felt compelled to join the relief. Two nonprofit leaders expressed they could no longer stand being indifferent bystanders, watching the tragedy in Wuhan. Despite having no clear plan, they determined to follow inner callings and found out their roles through engagement:

In the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, I planned to donate disaster supply kits and was told that only the Red Cross could accept our donations. We delivered the

supply kits to their warehouses. The warehouse manager did not seem to care. I returned home and decided to suspend our donations. I was depressed because there was nothing I could do...So this time, I decided to join the relief because I did not want to leave any regret. I asked [a Ginkgo Fellow] whether there was anything I could help (Case 2, Participant 1).

I am a psychotherapist. Initially, I did not know how I could help. People were working on delivering medical supplies, which is not my expertise. I paused and observed. I wanted to learn for the people who sought help, what were they looking for? How did people respond to their needs? On January 26, I saw pregnant women were asking for medical care. But there was no clear instruction on how to get the medical care they needed. I realized I could help them figure out the treatment process and get them fully prepared before they go to the hospital (Case 3, Participant 1).

For the other six grassroots organizations, they were pushed by institutional partners and volunteers to engage—they received requests from collaborating hospitals regarding the shortage of medical supplies or were asked by volunteers to support their pandemic relief initiatives. Some organizations immediately decided to put aside other work and join the relief, “it is wartime...in the pandemic, there is only one type of charity, that is pandemic relief organization” (Case 6, Participant 1). Other leaders had hesitations, “we are a foundation focusing on education. Should we engage? Does it fit our mission?” While as the severity of the pandemic upgraded, they no longer hesitated

It was such a severe and emergent situation. Whether being mission-related should not be a concern at this moment. More importantly, we have over a thousand volunteers in Hubei Province. The schools we supported were at the center of the pandemic. We needed to take care of our volunteers and their communities. We would try to do as much as we can (Case 8, Participant 1).

A funder supporting the pandemic relief action of these grassroots organizations indicated:

I think they devoted to the pandemic relief not because it created benefits to their organizations. Instead, as nonprofit professionals, they felt obligated to do it. And it is amazing how experienced and thoughtful they were in completing these impossible tasks (Interview 2).

Under such an emergent situation, the constraint in resources did not prevent grassroots organizations from engaging. To enhance

the effectiveness of their actions, they intentionally sought needs unmet by the government and other charities. They quickly gathered information and identified their unique roles in pandemic relief. Some organizations were among the first groups to notify the needs dismissed by the administration and professional disaster relief nonprofits, such as medical care for pregnant women and patients with rare disease, despite their lack of experiences in disaster relief.

3.2 | Leveraging social media platforms to scale up existing organizational networks and foster cross-sector collaboration

The lockdown and the policy that only five designated charities could accept donations to Wuhan and Hubei Province prohibited most nonprofits to be on site. To deliver supplies and services to Wuhan, they should obtain entry permits from the government, hospitals, or GONGOs. Then they had to verify the demands and identified reliable suppliers, which was particularly difficult since demands changed time-to-time, and numerous buyers were bidding for supplies. Finally, they should organize volunteers to track the delivery of supplies and contact local volunteers to provide necessary transportation as many courier firms were not allowed to enter Wuhan. All eight grassroots organizations realized the capacity of their organizations were insufficient to complete the complicated tasks in pandemic relief on their own.

Therefore, grassroots organizations stepped out of their comfort zone and collaborated with institutions and individuals that they never worked with before. A grassroots organization determined to partner with a GONGO. Although having concerns about their bureaucracy, the emergent situation left them with no choice. “We wanted to deliver drugs to people with rare diseases in Wuhan. Our team did a quick evaluation and concluded that we were not able to address the issues of getting prescriptions and delivering drugs, and (the GONGO) had strong connections to the government, hospitals, drug stores, and companies” (Case 1, Participant 1).

Since it was impossible to be on site, all grassroots organizations used social media to identify and convene collaborators. Some organizations ran online communities for their daily work, involving members from different sectors. The online communities quickly transformed into platforms for disaster relief initiatives where the demand and supply side could exchange information. Without knowing where potential collaborators were, they mobilized board members, staff, and volunteers to call for help through WeChat and other social media platforms. Day and night, they endeavored to reach out and ask friends to share the messages. “We tried to deliver ventilators to patients at home. It was a race against the grim reaper...In 3 days, three patients we contacted before passed away and one suicided...we turned off the screen, wept, and kept seeking people who could help us,” said a nonprofit leader (Case 2, Participant 1). Despite the randomness in seeking collaborators, the overall responses were positive. Individuals and organizations who were

loosely connected or had no connections before became collaborators,

I wanted to launch an online support group for pregnant women. But I did not know obstetricians and pregnant women personally, so I sent out invitations through WeChat, asking my friends to forward the message...In just one hour, our group had about 200 people, including obstetricians, pregnant women, and volunteers (Case 3, Participant 1).

The power of online platforms resided in person-to-person connections. As a nonprofit leader pointed out, personal contacts were often more effective than exchanges between institutions

A friend of mine wanted to donate masks but couldn't find a hospital willing to accept his donations, because accepting donations should go through complicated administrative procedures...I told him, you shouldn't contact the hospital, rather, you should contact the people in charge...in our network, we have doctors and donors. They can make direct connections (Case 4, Participant 1).

Thus, online platforms enabled grassroots organizations to spread the message and gain access to critical collaborators beyond the reach of their organizations. These horizontal collaborative networks were absent from bureaucracy and hierarchical reporting, where collaborators jointly determined the logistics and directly exchanged resources and information.

3.3 | Effective trust-building on online platforms

The emergency of the pandemic catalyzed collaboration, yet most collaborators and volunteers had never worked closely before, and it was challenging to maintain trustworthy information exchanges across collaborators in online platforms. What made rapid formation and effective operation of networks possible was trust-building.

The eight grassroots organizations all dedicated to philanthropy for years, earning reputation and respect from the government, GONGOs, stakeholders, and peers. The long-established trust from stakeholders enhances the efficiency of exchanges in the collaborative networks.

In the network, we trust each other, we have shared values. Although there was a lot of fake information online, no one ever doubted the information in our network. Our shared values sustain trust (Case 4, Participant 1).

Nonetheless, the initial trust was not enough. Most collaborators came together because of the pandemic and did not have close interactions before. There were tensions due to miscommunication, frustration in completing tasks, and different work habits. Besides, online communication magnified tensions and misunderstandings. The absence of face-to-face dialogues in most interactions made it harder to sense others' feelings. To retain trust among collaborators, grassroots organizations shared three key lessons.

The first is transparency. The advantage of online engagement was that collaborators could know how the initiatives progressed and whether the supplies were successfully delivered immediately. Even when the initiative encountered difficulties, donors and volunteers could understand and proceed as long as the communications were transparent.

Second, it was essential to give collaborators credits. "People will be angry if their value is not seen by others" (Case 2, Participant 1), and recognition motivated prosocial behaviors

We wanted [collaborator] to feel ownership of the initiative. We didn't want them to feel they were working for us. When the media came to us, we referred them to [collaborator], because we wanted the media to report their hard work. When they felt ownership, they would be more responsible and make fewer mistakes (Case 1, Participant 2).

The third is avoiding trespassing organization boundaries, and reassuring the concerns of competition, especially when working with smaller voluntary groups:

We were very careful with our tones. We respected their choice and wanted them to feel our relationships were equal. Even just giving resources to them, we ensured that the decision to receive was made by their core members (Case 1, Participant 8).

Although some collaborative networks had challenges in determining the division of labor and logistics, the eight grassroots organizations soon overcame the difficulties. Instead of being leaders demanding others to follow, they were supporters and cheerleaders for collaborators. Decentralized decision-making, transparent communications, and mutual respect dissolved misunderstandings in online communication and sustained trust.

4 | CHALLENGES IN THE PANDEMIC RELIEF

In previous sessions, we discussed three strategies facilitating the success of grassroots organizations. Nevertheless, there were challenges when applying each strategy for those grassroots nonprofits.

The severity of the pandemic and the sense of responsibilities pushed nonprofit leaders to shift the priority of their organizations to pandemic relief. Yet this decision did not necessarily yield good outcomes. Some organizations earned reputations, recruited more volunteers, and enhanced the solidarity of their team during the pandemic relief, yet others suffered from extra administrative and auditing burden. A nonprofit generously shared its public fundraising platform for other grassroots nonprofits without public fundraising qualifications to raise funds was overwhelmed by the reporting and auditing requirements afterwards. In the pandemic, to ensure rapid reactions and effective delivery of goods and services, the financial procedure had to be simplified. Yet the government auditing requirement did not take this situation into account, and enormous efforts and staff time were put into meeting the auditing requirements, creating frustration for the organization with limited administrative budgets.

Since the nonprofits are not professional disaster relief organizations, they encountered a deep learning curve. It took time to figure out what medical supplies were most needed, where they could get qualified products, and where was the best location to deliver them. They recruited and consulted professional volunteers—doctors and employees in medical and pharmaceutical industries and professional disaster relief experts, but the procedure was not always smooth. Some products were delayed in the delivery process due to the shortage of supplies, bad weather, and administrative barriers, and the changing demands of patients increased communication time and made the logistics complicated. A professional disaster relief expert reflected on the procedure and indicated that the traditional approach—having charities and government collect and match the supplies with the demands was probably not the most effective way due to high transaction costs in the communication process, an alternative approach could be creating a market of medical products specifically for Wuhan and Hubei Province, ensuring sufficient supplies and transportation capacity, where patients and medical institutions can purchase the goods and have them delivered, “although the Wuhan pandemic was so emergent that did not give us enough time to experiment this idea, we might try this in the future” (Interview 3).

In online organizing and trust-building, most grassroots organizations did not have hands-on experiences, and some volunteers disappointed about the inefficient organizing procedure quit. It took some time to develop an online workflow that balances decentralized structures and effective decision-making. The solution nonprofit leaders found was splitting the relief project into multiple tasks, having each online group focus on a single task, and establishing a core leadership team to coordinate different online groups and resolve disputes; instructions for volunteers, information of demands and supplies, and progress were documented in shared online documents for references. But still, the process of organizing was not free of disputes, and one of most serious controversies was how to resolve ethical dilemma where nonprofit leaders and volunteers had different values and standings. A participant recalled a difficult decision she made

We had heated debates on whether we should send oxygen concentrators to hospitals/ quarantine stations, or patients' home. Since more and more patients had been transmitted to hospitals and quarantine stations, we decided that sending oxygen concentrators there might save more people's lives, and only left a few concentrators for patients at home. A few days later, I received a phone call from a volunteer. She cried and asked me whether there were extra concentrators, “some patients at home were going to die”. But all the concentrators we had were distributed, and we couldn't retrieve our donations to hospitals/quarantine stations. Two days later, she called again and said these concentrators were no longer needed. I did not dare to ask what she meant by “no longer needed”, and whether it was because these patients had already passed away (Case 2, Participant 3).

In distributing precious medical supplies, there were controversies on the rank of priority. In such an intense situation, nonprofit leaders and volunteers bear enormous pressures, and keeping a calm demeanor became difficult.

Even though all organizations in the sample survived the internal conflicts and improved the structures and procedures of organizing, how to enhance the efficiency of coordination and settle ethical disputes in online platform deserve more attention from practitioners and scholars.

5 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Our research presents three strategies that facilitated successful pandemic relief action—shifting organizations' priority to pandemic relief, leveraging networks and cross-section collaboration through social media, and online trust-building. As discussed in the findings, successful implementation of these strategies was premised on nonprofit leaders' strong sense of responsibilities, rich experiences and thoughtfulness in collaborations, and initial trusts among key participants. Otherwise, the pandemic relief action might have never happened or suspended.⁴ Our research focuses on examining positive cases, which helps us identify the factors contributing to the success of the pandemic relief. Future research can examine the cases of failure to verify the generalizability of our findings.

Our research has broad implications as COVID-19 has thrown the world into an age of uncertainty. It challenges our conventional wisdom about the types of organizations that are most effective in disasters and crises. The surprising surge of nonlocal grassroots organizations offered us important insights on how organizations may be able to deal with the new realities presented by COVID-19 and

⁴Our interviewees reported they heard of the failures of other grassroots action, including delivering wrong products to wrong places, the medical supplies coming too late and no longer needed, and the suspension of relief actions due to internal conflicts and disputes.

force us to reconsider the existing narratives and norms of nonprofit organizations. Here we offer three broad observations about the implications of our findings on nonprofits' engagement in disaster relief and public and nonprofit administration literature in general.

First, the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and its resulting administrative failures across sectors challenge the assumption that different sectors will automatically fill in the gaps of services due to the failures of other sectors during a crisis (Steinberg, 2006). The mutual embeddedness and symbiosis might lead to the simultaneous failures of multiple sectors. The experiences of these grassroots organizations point to the value of cultivating independent grassroots organizations that can circumnavigate administrative barriers and provide quick responses in the crisis. More research should be conducted to understand how sector failures may reinforce themselves in disasters and extreme events.

Second, our findings point to the comparative advantages of small and volunteer-based organizations in a disaster. As Hannan and Freeman (1984) pointed out, the norms of rationality, which drive organizations to be reliable and accountable, may inevitably result in structural inertia. The expectations for organizations to consistently reproduce quality services and rationally account for action induce hierarchy, standardized routines, and mechanical responses to changes in the environment. In COVID-19, as some large organizations—government and GONGOs were subject to high inertia, grassroots organizations, owing to their flexibility and openness, were not bound by their agenda and routines. They quickly adapted and embraced inclusive, horizontal organizing structures. Here we do not argue that large organizations are not able to adapt. In fact, after the first few weeks' chaos, governments and GONGOs worked out a comprehensive plan and achieved major success in fighting against the pandemic. Yet our observations do echo the theory that small grassroots organizations are less to structural inertia. As a funder of the pandemic relief action indicated, “the grassroots action makes me feel we need government and large disaster relief organizations, but at the same time, small grassroots organizations and individual helping are also separately needed. Just like a jungle, each ecological niche has its unique value. When encountering a catastrophe, artificial forests with low species richness might be destroyed, but the resilience and vibrancy of a jungle was much stronger” (Interview 2).

Finally, the pandemic relief of grassroots organizations represents a form of spontaneous volunteering (Simsa et al., 2019). As the COVID-19 moved our social interactions online, the strategies identified in our research may be applied to other disaster relief action online. Our findings offer researchers and practitioners an opportunity to reimagine how cross-sector collaboration and stakeholder engagement could be conducted. These grassroots nonprofit leaders masterfully leveraged their networks and impacts through online platforms and quickly built trust with various stakeholders during COVID-19. As internet-based strategies have transformed how nonprofits typically deliver services and

communicate with stakeholders (Saxton & Guo, 2012), this field report sheds light on how these platforms help nonprofits do things they can never imagine before: responding to a global crisis in their home office.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data subject to third party restrictions.

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